

The Great White Way, 22 miles, 9 years, 1 street (Whitney version #2) documents one of the earliest instances of artist William Pope.L's iconic "crawls," an ongoing performance that involves him lying on the street — in this case, Broadway — and dragging himself forward on his elbows and knees for as long as he can bear it. His movements are strained and jerky, as if struggling to carry not only the weight of his own body but a much heavier, if intangible, load. His abjection is further amplified by his Superman costume — a symbol of upward mobility, something the superhero possessed in spades (think of him shooting upwards, hand erect, body parallel to the city's skyscrapers) that the performer does not. Pope.L has described homelessness as a catalyst for his crawls; more specifically, he has pinpointed the way these dispossessed people become an accepted part of New York City's landscape, so normal, in fact, that pedestrians don't even see them, let alone register their desperation. The public humiliation of his crawls is an attempt, in his words, to "renew this conflict."¹ "I crawl to remember," he has said.²

Broadway is a storied thoroughfare. The short stretch, now known as the Theater District, was nicknamed "The Great White Way" towards the end of the nineteenth century as it was one of the first streets in the United States to be fully illuminated by electricity. That much of New York's early infrastructure, like Broadway, was originally built, at least in part, by African slaves when Manhattan was under Dutch rule insinuates tragedy into this nickname. Pope.L's performance evokes this history and the way it bears on the present. By pressing his able body down flat on this dirty, historic avenue, he visualizes the axis of power between horizontal and vertical urban bodies and comments on societal inequities that reach back centuries.

His performance resonates with one of the main projects of VALIE EXPORT's interdisciplinary work, which is to investigate how structures of power not only circumscribe our lives and inform our behaviors but also occupy our minds and shape how we see the world. Whether in performance, video, film, or installation, her work creates awareness around such states of occupation through audacious gestures, as in her iconic performance *TAP and TOUCH Cinema*

(1968) and more nuanced meditations that address the disorienting and disturbing aspects of trying to extract oneself from convention. For example, *Facing a Family* (1971), a 4 minute 44 second black-and-white video originally broadcast on Austrian television, is a single-shot take of a family staring at the camera, much like an actual family might be staring at the TV. An example of EXPORT's technique of "doubling," the work comments on TV, its one-to-many broadcast model, and the kind of social behaviors it facilitates while, simultaneously, disrupting that same structure. Imagine how strange it must have been to watch a family sitting closely together while individually staring at the lens of the camera, and suddenly be compelled to consider one's own normalized conditions of viewing, the individual gazes of a group of people sitting adjacently in silence.

EXPORT's film *Invisible Adversaries* (1976) narrates a struggle with an occupation through the story of Anna, a woman fighting to retain her sanity and sense of self amidst the onset of an insidious alien force, called the Hyksos. For Anna, the aliens are threatening not only because of their hostility but, more so, because they are indiscernible. She can sense them — "I clearly feel evidence of their invasion." — but she can't locate any physical, tangible proof of their existence. Instead, she perceives them in fleeting moments: they simmer in heated exchanges between her and her lover, stare down at her from public monuments, and look back at her when glances in the mirror.

We chose *Invisible Adversaries* as a touchstone for the exhibition because the condition it describes, where a hostile force circles around the protagonist and also infiltrates her mind, connects with the ways artists approach their adversaries: not as enemies to overthrow but as complex relationships that are a profound part of our history and personal lives. The term invisible adversaries is also an apt analogy for our current political and technological predicament: the Hyksos of our moment, that entrenched, threatening force, could be said to be neoliberalism which is similarly so omnipresent that it becomes elusive, evading recognition or blame. Coextensively, thanks to our ubiquitous devices, we are now constantly monitored by inscrutable programs, a situation that virtually precludes opting out of systems that might act against our best interests. The film *Invisible Adversaries* is also embedded with a feminist psychology: EXPORT's longstanding interests in

1 Martha Wilson, "William Pope.L," *Bomb* 55 (Spring 1996): <http://bombmagazine.org/article/1957/william-pope-l>.

2 Ibid.

confronting misogyny reaches delirious heights as Anna is psychically tortured by a patriarchal society, whose connection to Nazism is thinly veiled. All of this seemed to be a fertile point of departure for a collection that is replete with works that powerfully address the social and political body.

1

“There’s nothing definite in the papers, and none of my friends mentioned anything. No, no nonsense. They slip into people’s bodies and alter their minds from there, and through control of the mind they alter society. Honest, I didn’t make it up.”³

In *Invisible Adversaries*, the aliens inhabit ideology, not uncanny human-like forms. (“Beware of communication. Hyksos are contagious,” a solemn voice on a radio broadcast warns.) They operate through words, gestures, expressions, the law, and, while Anna experiences them as an invasion, it becomes clear that they come not from outer space but from society itself. Made in a post-WW2 Vienna, the film evokes the lingering presence of Nazism, a hushed though active influence. Quite a few works in the exhibition reflect on ways we are entangled in eras or beliefs deemed to be over, but actually very much alive.

Paul Chan’s installation *5th Light* (2006) comprises a single shaft of light — actually a video projection — in which silhouettes of guns, luggage, car parts, and furniture appear to fall. Their slow sinking recalls imagery from 9/11 and, yet, the wide, incongruous gamut of objects indicates something broader, perhaps the collapse of an entire civilization. Part of a series titled *7 Lights* (2005–07), *5th Light* is derived from religious references: the Biblical seven days of creation and the seven stars mentioned in the Book of Revelations. It evokes the persistence of religious narratives as a means to understand — or justify — conflicts and catastrophe. “Anyone who is even remotely interested in the present tense can’t help but see the hold religion has, here and there,” Chan has said.⁴ While the work imagines a destruction of biblical proportions, its shadowy nature — shadows falling in a void of white light — wrenches the events out of a specific time and place. It’s unclear whether *5th Light* imagines

a coming apocalypse or gives form to the hell on earth that is our continual state of war and disaster.

The air of inevitability in *5th Light* is tied to Chan’s longstanding interests in societies that have gone off course, from utopian thinking recalled in *Happiness (Finally) After 35,000 Years of Civilization (after Henry Darger and Charles Fourier)* (2000–03) to the antiterror rhetoric of United States during George W. Bush’s presidency (2000–08) that is the subject of his *Tin Drum Trilogy* (2002–05). In this body of work, Chan never concentrates political adversaries into one single, unified body, but rather explodes the scope of conflict to illustrate its complexity. Whereas Anna is desperate to see her enemy, he refuses to find one. On the trilogy’s themes, he wrote:

Each video in the series was made utilizing different experimental traditions, but with one consistent theme: that to love your enemy is to know your enemy. I essentially sleep with the enemy and the time spent creating these sleep-works becomes the space to both escape from and engage with what it means to live through an infinite war. The Bush administration (in *RE:THE_OPERATION*), Iraqis (in *Baghdad In No Particular Order*), and the religious right living in red-state America (in *NOW PROMISE NOW THREAT*) are all perceived, rightly or wrongly, as enemies. The task of all three videos have been to make the friend/enemy distinction more difficult while at the same time giving a time-based critique of the political tragedy/farce that is our first five years of the twenty-first century.⁵

Carrie Mae Weems’ *Lincoln, Lonnie and Me — A Story in 5 Parts* (2012) could also be described as a “sleep-work” for the way it surfaces specters from the racialized American unconscious, specters that she distances herself from while also showing her complex attachment to them. The large-scale installation approximates a stage cordoned off by a velvet rope and framed by heavy red curtains on which life-sized, ghost-like figures appear in a flickering procession. Using the Pepper’s ghost technique, the figures reference stereotypes of

3 Anna in VALIE EXPORT’s *Invisible Adversaries*

4 Lindsay, Shana Gallagher. “PAUL CHAN.” *Museo Magazine*, 2011. <http://www.museomagazine.com/PAUL-CHAN>

5 Paul Chan “Paul Chan: Tin Drum Trilogy followed by a Q&A with the artist.” *The New Museum Digital Archive*, May 16, 2008. http://archive.newmuseum.org/index.php/Detail/Occurrence/Show/occurrence_id/1042

African-Americans as well as Weems's own invented characters (some played by her). Among the cast can be found The Boxer, Tap Dancer, Lincoln, Lonnie, The Joker, and a Playboy Bunny. Per its title, the work references the American President, as well as Weems's longtime collaborator and friend, the artist and activist Lonnie Graham, and provides a meditation on Weems's negotiation of the United States' history of slavery and exploitation, and the way this history hounds American contemporary life. On *Lincoln, Lonnie and Me*, art historian Huey Copeland writes, "underlines how projections, absences, and the shapes we give to them remain central to the rescripting of the historical past and to the workings of the modern imagination itself."⁶ Both Chan and Weems play with projections and absences, light and darkness to signal the muted presence of past eras; their tactics recall a scene in *Invisible Adversaries* where Anna places thumbtacks around her shadow on the wall in an attempt to capture and examine her unconscious, to see if it might conceal Hyksos within it, to pinpoint and eradicate her fears. She gives up half-finished, leaving the outline of thumbtacks undone.

2

Invisible Adversaries is rife with experimental technique and interspersed with tropes of 70s performance art. In one scene, a 16mm film plays above Anna as she sleeps, as if visualizing her dream as a movie. In it, she dons ice skates and tramps through the empty streets of Vienna. Before taking to the rink, she removes the skates and slices the tops of her thighs with their blades so that, slightly later, her turns on the ice leave thin red traces. Similarly, the film's formal effects seem to inflict violence on Anna, or to manifest the psychic torture she endures. Jump cuts jar the narrative, upending her reality, making it seem illusory. This schizophrenic structure, along with an asynchronous soundtrack — for instance, a man's orgasmic moans overlay a short scene of Anna, alone in a darkroom, developing a photograph of a vagina — manifest her feelings of objectification, isolation, and paranoia.

Certain sculptural works in the exhibition embody a similarly disassociative and emotionally charged state. Rachel Harrison's *Pink Stool* (2005), a bashed-up shape, distantly recalling a female torso,

topped with a stringy mane of black hair, is triumphantly forlorn, wicked in its send-up of a classical bust. Known for sculptures that are antimemorial in their embrace of clutter, precarity, and, what would popularly be deemed "bad ideas," Phyllida Barlow made *dirtytwister* (2012) by torquing steel armature into a kind of ludicrous hair bow on acid, and spray-painting it. In their works these artists insert "the everyday" — pop culture, vernacular design, gendered or kitschy consumer goods — into the art historical legacies of abstraction and minimalism, insinuating aspects of common abjection into the self-styled austerity of those movements. Similarly, Amy Sillman, whose *Black Doorway* (2011) is included, is known for a radical rearticulation of abstract expressionist painting and its hallowed male underpinnings. In her *Franza series* (2014), Ulrike Müller infuses the body and feeling into modernist art forms. On Müller's work, Kerstin Stakemeier has written, "her paintings elicit from abstraction its supposed opposite: a new kind of figuration, where the body and sex are everywhere yet not quite identifiable."⁷ These works bring life and the messy and contradictory nature of the body into modernist art traditions. They could be likened to Anna's actions in a Viennese town square: when faced with deadened versions of her fellow citizens, literally life-sized paper cut-outs seated on the rim of a public fountain, she freaks out, runs around them, and then collapses on the ground in a performance that rejects complicity with their banality, with their homogenizing posture, with their metaphorical call to *Join us! Join us! Join us!*

3

This scene of public breakdown and attempted self-exorcism, like much of EXPORT's work, utilizes the body as a site to contest power. A main inquiry of the exhibition *Invisible Adversaries* is, following EXPORT, to consider how the body is a site of struggle, and how that struggle evolves as the body, itself, shape-shifts from flesh-and-blood to vaporous ghost or unattainable data set.

In Patty Chang's *Untitled (Eels)* (2001), the camera faces the artist as something under her crisp, buttoned-up white shirt (what the viewer only knows from the title to be an eel) writhes, tightening its and releasing its grip over her breasts and torso. As her facial expressions twist in pain and her shirt becomes

6 Copeland, Huey. "Specters of History." *Artforum*, September 2014, 342–344.

7 Stakemeier, Kerstin. "Ulrike Müller, Museum of Modern Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, Vienna." *Artforum*, February 2016, 228–229.

increasingly wet, the viewer is left to wonder how much of this performance, which so clearly enacts a subjection to a prurient male gaze, is pain and how much of it is pleasure. The question is never resolved. Chang is wrestling not only with internalized misogyny but the more complicated ways it intersects with her own desires. In her series of photographs *The Ohio Project* (1999), Nikki S. Lee casts herself into different subcultures, literally by dressing up as and playing out the codes of different social groups, like yuppies, punks, club kids, lesbians, or, in the case of *The Ohio Project*, poor, white Midwesterners. In fluidly moving between social categories, Lee points to the mutability and performativity of identity. More somber and elegant is Lorna Simpson's *Time piece (Time piece 1)* (1990), a portrait of a woman's back, which repeats identically across four panels. The woman pictured refuses the gaze of onlookers who, try as they might, cannot apprehend her. Any detail that might lead one to an assumption about her is withheld.

From the perspective of our new data-mined and highly surveyed society, withholding all information or turning one's back on representation has increasingly become impossible. Now, we are continually quantified and analyzed by machine vision, algorithmic processes that are literally invisible and which push artistic contestations with representation into a postvisual terrain. Included in this exhibition are three photographs by Trevor Paglen; among them, *Untitled (Reaper Drone)* (2015) envisions a spectacular night sky, an extraordinary landscape whose crux is the barely visible passage of a reaper drone. Paglen has said that he is not in the "business of 'exposing' anything so as much as trying to create images and artworks that bring something into a visual field then hopefully complicate that visibility."⁸ When apprehending *Untitled (Reaper Drone)*, and his other works, viewers are transfixed by the question of whether we can any longer see a beautiful sky without also seeing war at work, and further, we are left to wonder where else in our field of vision weapons might lurk. Hito Steyerl's *Factory of the Sun* (2015) departs from the illegibility of contemporary finance and the abstraction of an increasingly algorithmic world to imagine a future where humans are reduced to instruments in a new currency based

on sunlight that, what with our current environmental issues, could not be so far off. *Factory of the Sun* is populated by bodies, but they strive only to circulate, to exist within a preset system; they have given up on trying to differentiate themselves or to fight or argue for their own autonomy, much less assert their even more outmoded rights. This scenario could be tied with Steyerl's own stated suspicion of the visual realm. In her 2006 essay, "Spam of the Earth: A Withdrawal from Representation," she wrote:

For a certain time already I have noted that many people have started actively avoiding photographic or moving-image representations, surreptitiously taking their distance from the lenses of cameras. Whether it's camera-free zones in gated communities or elitist techno clubs, someone's declining interviews, Greek anarchists smashing cameras, or looters destroying LCD TVs, people have started to actively, and passively, refuse constantly being monitored, recorded, identified, photographed, scanned, and taped. Within a fully immersive media landscape, pictorial representation—which was seen as a prerogative and a political privilege for a long time—feels more like a threat.⁹

Factory of the Sun, and previous works of Steyerl's like *How Not to be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV File* (2013), depict people with postrepresentational aims. Their bodies have been reduced to money or, as in *How Not to be Seen...*, canvases for projection. For them, culture is a trap, a false promise, not a place to insert pictures of one's body. Through these manifold artistic approaches, *Invisible Adversaries* responds to our contemporary condition where representation remains a hotly contested battleground and has also become, as Steyerl described, "a threat."

4

Shortly following a nighttime scene where she is seen walking down the street nearly ricocheting off of men who are masturbating, Anna pays a visit to a therapist. Their brief conversation distills the feminist critique of psychoanalysis that courses through

8 "Trevor Paglen in Conversation with Lauren Cornell" In *Mass Effect: Art and the Internet in the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Lauren Cornell and Ed Halter (New York: New Museum and MIT Press, 2015), 255.

9 Hito Steyerl, "The Spam of the Earth: Withdrawal from Representation," in *The Wretched of the Screen* (New York: e-flux, 2012), 160–175. Available online: <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/the-spam-of-the-earth/>

the film. Anna has prepared a written document, which she explains provides “objective proof” of her experience of the Hyksos. The therapist quickly responds by diagnosing her with schizophrenia, interpreting the voices she hears and the “doubling” she relates (a previous scene shows her walking away from a mirror while her image remains still) as symptoms of mental illness. The sympathetic viewer is not so sure. What the therapist sees as indications of madness seems to be signs of Anna’s alienation from a sexist and conservative society and a battle against her own objectification (perhaps this — her own objectified image — is what she leaves behind in the mirror). At the end of their session, she surprises the therapist by taking his photograph, surely with the intent to add the image to her file of “objective proof” of the Hyksos invasion.

Like the film, works in the exhibition endeavor to make aspects of the unconscious visible. Roni Horn’s *a.k.a.* (2008–09) pairs photographs of the artist, from infancy to adulthood, to examine how one understands — or remembers — one’s own history and selfhood. Eija Liisa-Ahtila’s multipart video installation *Lahja — The Present* (2001) features reenactments of four women’s experiences with psychosis: for instance, in *Underworld*, a paranoid patient hides underneath a hospital bed, fearful

that killers are coming for her; *Bridge* tells the story of a mother who was only able to cross a certain bridge on her hands and knees. Jo Spence collaborated with Terry Donnett on *Remodeling Photo History* (1981–82), a profound rethinking of modern photographic genres. Their “remodeling,” which often involves the substitution of an idealized body with their own aged, fleshy, and implicitly queer ones, is a dismantling that breaks down stylistic conventions and disrupts a heteronormative gaze. These psychologically dense works provide anchors to an exhibition that explores how adversaries occupy us, like the Hyksos’ “invasion,” not through colonizing armies but by taking deep root in our bodies and minds.

Invisible Adversaries tracks backwards from our current moment to consider how artists in the past five decades have attempted to resist or withdraw from manifold states of occupation. Their varied tactics and methods points to how artistically generative antagonism can be, and how fresh and relevant works from the 70s, 80s, and 90s remain. The breadth and diversity of the works in the Hessel Collection, marked by passion for the art in the social realm, and inclusive of so many women and feminist positions, makes such an exhibition possible.